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ABSTRACT

When composition teachers use their own essays as models for students' writing, they provide a process for students to learn and a product for their imitation. The models can be both readable and related to the mode currently being studied while also being vehicles for making the teacher more "vulnerable" to the students. The process described by one teacher includes the creation and production of the model essay; the distribution of the model essay; written and oral evaluation of the model essay; and the production, presentation, and critique of students' essays. The oral critique is especially important in this process and includes general orientation and instructions, analysis in very small groups of a specific topic related to the essay, and presentations of conclusions to the entire class followed by class discussion. The teacher participates in each group as facilitator, consultant, or motivator. This process has proven successful in providing resource material for students and in motivating students as they see the instructor go through the same writing and evaluation process that they must follow. (TJ)

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WRITE, IF YOU WANT TO TEACH WRITING

by

Robert C. Wess

I

"Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." I have continuously resisted this old saying since it implies a certain amount of nonproductivity. Yet, at the end of each teaching semester, year in and year out, all I had to show for my work were notes I had accumulated, a few scribbled ideas on some possible research, and several leftover exam papers. True, I always hoped that I had transferred the legacy of learning to my students. But what did I have to show to myself (as opposed to my students) as a result of all these efforts? The answer, I am sorry to say, has almost always been little or nothing. The old saying echoed in my ears.

My solution to this problem began to take shape about two years ago. At that time I began to produce my own essays as models for my students' writing. As I worked on these essays, I discovered that such work provided a process for my students to learn and a product for their imitation. I felt as if I was beginning to turn the old teacher slur on its head. I have experienced such quiet jubilation from this work that I would like to share my technique with all teachers of composition and, indeed, with all teachers of any field who want to give the lie to that old saying, who want to teach by doing and not by saying, and who want literal evidence of their own productivity.

I should add, at this point, that there were extrinsic as well as intrinsic reasons for my decision to use teacher-model essays

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in teaching writing. For one thing, textbook readers very often require an already educated, adept, and sophisticated reader. Most of my students are none of these. Readers often require a knowledge of history, biography, or literary art. My students usually lack these qualifications. What is more, my students are looking for immediate relevance. To imitate these professional models, however, would usually not be related to students' interests and would usually require the efforts of another professional. Obviously, my students lack both the interest and the ability. Finally, these models themselves were not written per se to satisfy the requirements of the rhetorical mode being studied; hence, their usefulness as models of that mode is sometimes limited.

My goal has been to break down these barriers between models and students. Positively expressed, I have created my own models for students which are readable and related to the mode being studied. I have carried out for the teacher what Ken Macrorie encouraged for his students: "We need to encourage students to become vulnerable by introducing their real feelings and thoughts and experience into our classrooms."[1] I remember how exhilirated I was when I read Macrorie's book three years ago, but I also remember feeling that he did not take his thesis far enough. Macrorie himself really was not vulnerable to his students, for Macrorie did not write about his own vulnerability. In my models, therefore, I have resolved to be truthful by writing from my own experience, to be vulnerable by laying out my own ideas, experience, and attitudes in writing, and to be confident that students will be

understanding of the values which I share with them.

II

What I would like to describe is the process by which I myself become vulnerable to my students and they to me. This process is a series of steps, involving written and oral techniques, which are primarily directed to improving student writing. I will describe four steps in this process. The first is the creation and production of my own model essay; second is the distribution of this essay; third involves evaluation, both written and oral, of my model essay. The fourth and final step is the production, presentation, and critique of students' essays.

Step One is the production of my own essay. I follow the typical steps of brainstorming, outlining, and writing the essay. After proofreading, I type the essay and quik-print it to provide a copy for each student. This final version also contains my title, a thesis statement, and a topical outline.

Step Two is the distribution of the essay with comment on my choice of topic, procedure in writing the essay, and/or rhetorical mode. I then ask my students to read the essay carefully and to critique it. Topics for this written critique are varied, but they usually focus on qualities of a good essay: clear and sustained thesis, clear and competent organization, sufficient paragraph and essay development, appropriate diction and use of sentence skills, correct grammar and usage, and correct punctuation/capitalization/spelling. Sometimes, however, I ask the students to write on the topic of the essay, its ideas, or its manifestation of mode. What-

ever they write on becomes background and discussion material for the in-class oral critique of the essay. When they bring their written critique to the next class, I usually allow them a few minutes to review their ideas before collecting their papers.

III

At this point the class is ready to begin the next and most important phase of its study--the oral critique of the model essay. This phase is like the lecture/lab/presentation-of-conclusions method employed in the natural sciences. In the oral-critique method, this tripartite procedure is maintained. First, the general orientation has preceded (given during the last class period); now general instructions follow. These directions include a list of topics with explanation given on the blackboard; the class then divides into smaller "lab" groups, each to analyze a specific topic. After arriving at conclusions, each group presents its findings. In terms of class interaction, these groupings may be described as convergent, divergent, and re-convergent.

The divergent part, the small-group discussions, is reminiscent of Ken Macrorie's "helping circle,"[2] but the essay here being discussed is not a student's but the teacher's essay. These "circles" should be limited to three or four groups, variously picked to break up cliques and limited to three-to-five per group to allow students to feel comfortable. Each of these groups has its own topic which it applies to the model. The conclusions and important ideas are recorded by the group's reporter, the one responsible for

relaying the group's conclusions to the entire class. This secretary may be teacher-designated, the students' choice, or the teacher's surprise designate at reporting time. In any event, as the semester progresses, I make sure that every student gets at least one chance to be recorder.

My role as teacher during this divergent phase is most important. First of all, as these small groups get started, I set a definite time limit because I know that students will work more diligently to get their ideas together within a given time-frame. Second, I make sure to reach each group at least once. This teacher presence gives each student a sense of my moral support and interest.[3] Third, I try to function within each group in one of three ways, either as facilitator, consultant, or motivator.

As facilitator, I keep several things in mind. I attempt to clear up any misunderstandings or potential problems. As I enter a group, I "tune in" to what is being discussed. If the group is silent, I say something like "It looks as if you need help" or "You look stuck," anything which might invite their participation. If the group is off the topic, I try to re-direct their focus. If the group is involved in on-target discussion, I do some active listening.

As consultant, my first goal is <u>not</u> to make things too easy for students by answering all their questions. Instead, I throw individual questions back to the group and ask for their answers. The advantages of this approach are obvious. Peer-initiated answers to questions are more meaningful than teacher responses;

Inductive learning is more likely to stay with students; and finally, if students "take the ball" they are showing greater responsibility for their own learning.

In my role as motivator, I try to do three things; to keep the students challenged, to provide lots of stroking, and to keep things enjoyable. In the first role, often one provocative question will challenge student ingenuity and stimulate discussion. As for encouragement, I try to give lots of it. At first, I stroke any approximation of the behavior I am looking for; later, I stroke only that which meets the standard. Finally, I try to realize the importance of pastiming, of getting off the subject through humor, quipping, or unrelated comment. Students sometimes need such diversion. In fact, such "interludes" often make them more eager to return to their task.

After time allowed for the small-group discussion is up, students re-converge into a large group to share conclusions. Reporters present their group's ideas. Class discussion about their presentations may be encouraged on the spot or delayed until all have been made. Either method works satisfactorily, but "on the spot" discussion will bring out questions, comments, or discussion which may never emerge if postponed to a slotted time. Even the teacher may sense a good "on the spot" comment which will trigger group reaction. If such questions or comments are delayed, I find that student enthusiasm often dries up because the appropriate context has been lost.

These small-group discussions are extremely valuable to both student and teacher. By verbalizing ideas, students share valuable viewpoints on what strengthens or weakens an essay. Through their

honesty, students reveal to the teacher the essay's negative and positive features. If the teacher argues about these views, if he strenuously defends his choices, or if he dictatorially refuses negative feedback, students will turn off their enthusiasm and the oral critiques will fail. On the other hand, if the teacher allows students their views, students will willingly share them. The best way I have found to show acceptance of even negative comments is <u>not</u> to react at all but simply to paraphrase the student's response ("You feel that. . .") and allow the student to explain further the viewpoint. As teacher in such a situation, I must become an active listener, one who listens with openness and attentiveness and who can internalize and then verbalize the thoughts and feelings of the students. When I do, I pick up some excellent ideas on what works well and where I can make improvements. Is it not exciting to think that the teacher can improve his/her <u>own</u> writing in his/her composition classes?

As part of this large-group discussion, after concluding the reporters' summaries, I add my own summary which emphasizes some of the more significant contributions. This teacher-reinforcement of ideas strengthens their hold in students' minds. Second, when appropriate, I give positive reinforcement to individual groups or to the whole class. Third, I point out any inaccuracies or misconceptions that may have been made by the reporters. If a significant number of misconceptions or problems exist, I may assign a homework to focus on them. At the next class meeting, I will apply the same tripartite model to this new set of questions.

The fourth step in this process is the production and pre-

sentation of student essays. Having used my own essay as a model, students now take their turn to make themselves vulnerable by telling the truth, sharing their experiences, and seeking understanding of their values. They put themselves on the line in the creation of their own essays. Also, just as the teacher has done, the student reads his/her essay to the class. Just as the class wrote a critique of the teacher's presentation, so now on the same paper students critique the ideas and the presentation of their classmates. For the idea-part of their critique, they have the six criteria mentioned earlier. For technique, they are given a handout explaining three important aspects of oral presentation: clarity, communication, and conviction. It is on these topics that they make the evaluation of presentation-method. Finally, all students see me privately to read over peer critiques and tell me what they have learned.

Such is my model for using teacher-produced essays in teaching composition. Involving four steps, the model first involves the process of creating the product--the teacher's model essay. Then comes the distribution of that essay with appropriate explanation. Third involves the written and especially the oral evaluation of the model. The final step is the students' process of producing, presenting, and critiquing their own essays. The teacher using this model effectively thus gives the lie to that old saying about doers and teachers. In its place can be put another saying: "Those who can, do; and teachers can, too."

For the student, too, the payoffs of this approach are considerable. The student finds the teacher models simpler and easier

to understand than the textbook models. Having the same format of title, outline, thesis, and essay of 500 words, the essay can serve as a model for the student's own assignment. Finally, the teacher's involvement with her own topic and essay rubs off on students. Teacher-interest in writing, generated through teacher enthusiam, spills over onto students.

Students, however, speak for themselves. In Fall semester, 1978, in a class using only my model essays, students commented on the use of teacher essays in the class. On content, one student wrote: "It also helped me come up with ideas for some of the essays." On method, a different student said the model essays "did help me understand the way an essay is supposed to be written. I don't think I could have written a good essay without them." Regarding the overall approach, another student summed up her feelings this way: I feel that the study of the teacher model-essays was the very best way to help the students understand what they are supposed to write." Strong praise, indeed! Yet such reaction has become my common experience ever since I began teaching writing by doing the writing myself.

Some of the most compelling reasons for using teacher models are its motivational advantages. Since I produce outline, thesis statement, creative title, and the typing, I never get any complaints from students about doing these tasks. Since the oral discussion of essay type involves the critique of my own essay, students feel a greater sense of sharing, of give and take, on my part. My willingness to listen and learn from their criticism

enables them to be much more attentive to my critiques of their essays. My model, the result of brainstorming, rough draft, revisions, and final product, provides a realistic yet inspirational ideal for my students to follow. They sense rather quickly that if they put forth similar effort, the results will usually be good. Finally, the inspiration becomes reflexive. As I see students opening up to their own experiences, using my model constructively and creatively for their own essays, putting forth a lot of effort, I feel a tremendous thrill that my writing has become an effective teaching device and a most satisfying personal experience.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ken Macrorie, A Vulnerable Teacher, Rochelle Park: Hayden Book Co., 1974, p. 21.

[2]Ken Macrorie, Telling Writing, Rochelle Park: Hayden Book Co, 1970 See Chapter Nine.

[3]Robert Carkhuff, David Berenson, and Richard Pierce, The Skills of Teaching: Interpersonal Skills, Human Resource Development Press, 1977, p. 13.